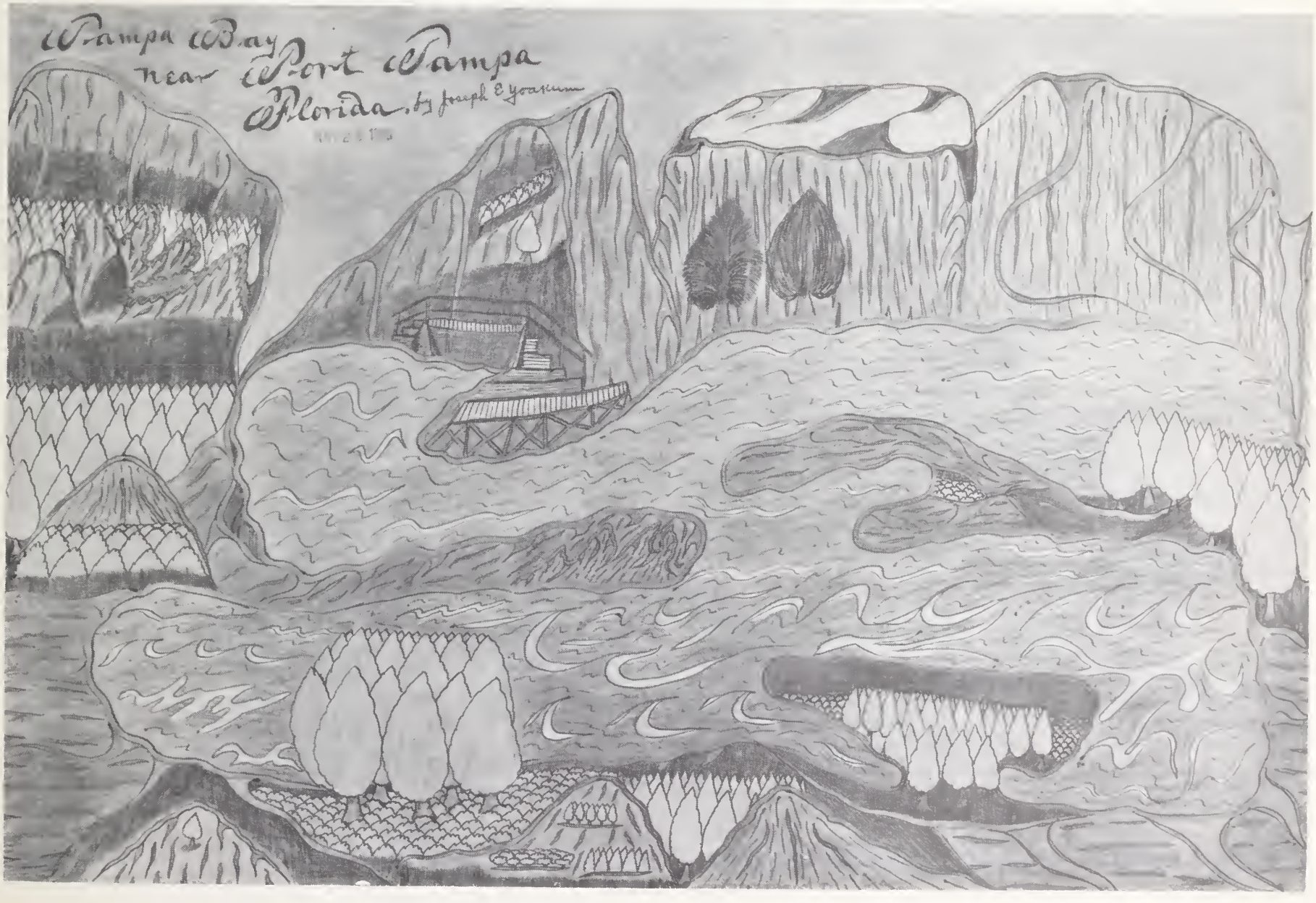
joseph e. yoakum



I first saw the work of Joseph Yoakum several years ago in Sacramento, at the home of Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson. Both artists had come from Chicago, where they were part of the "Hairy Who" group. They, and other painters (among them Cynthia Carlson, Christina Ramberg, Phil Hanson, Roger Brown and Ray Yoshida) had known Yoakum for many years and collected his work. Richard Fraenkel, who was Director of Exhibitions at the Pennsylvania State University Art Museum, gave Yoakum a small exhibition there in 1969; this was the first public exposure he received. It is, however, largely through the interest and friendship of Whitney Halstead that Yoakum's work has achieved a larger audience.

I would like to thank the lenders to this exhibition for their generosity, Linda Cathcart for her assistance with its organization, and Whitney Halstead for locating work and writing the catalogue essay.

Marcia Tucker
Associate Curator

"The spirit has no form, yet that which moves and transforms the form is the spirit."

Wang Wei, (415-443)
Chinese poet and painter

Joseph Yoakum says that he began to draw at the age of 76. This was after years of work and travel—with circuses, on freighters and railroading as well as a period in France with the army during the first World War. As varied as his experiences have been they did not include that of artist until 1962, when, inspired by a dream he made his first drawing. During the next eight years he worked intensely, often making one and sometimes two a day.

There seems to have been no precedent, no example for him to follow in creating these memory images, yet intuitively and with a truly remarkable grasp of formal problems he exercised the greatest inventiveness in working out solutions for them. Untrained and naive in art, his isolation from tradition and from contact with other artists, at least in the beginning, proved to be a strength for him rather than a handicap. Memories of places he had seen blended imperceptibly with fantasy in drawing after

drawing. It is his own reality, a reality which transcends mere physical fact or temporal limits.

Like Blake's angel, Yoakum's vision is not to be doubted. His first dream-inspired drawing and many of the later ones he has described as resulting from a process of "spiritual unfoldment." In hundreds of landscapes he describes a unique world, a world which is made up primarily of hills and mountains, especially of mountains into which a white curving road moves. It might be read as a metaphor for his travels. The clouds in this world are wild, the seas deep, but their rising waves are combed into reglmented curls. Groves of trees grow in mountain valleys and some make solo appearances standing for their portraits. But above all the geography of these landscapes is one of mountains with peaks of pointed, arched or buttressed forms, evidence of thrusts and folds of a unique geology. Their formations are freed from conventional gravitational forces—or are subject to another gravitational law—and the folds and wrinkles, the ridges and valleys seem to align themselves along lines of force governed by some unknown magnetic field.

The repetition of motif and the echoing contours, like a consciously developed leitmotif in music or like the repeated patterns in myth, give to them a resonance which seems remarkable in their small scale and delicate medium. Also reminiscent of myth is their anthropomorphism, the brooding profile cliffs, for example, or the double image of the entire landscape into a face. Theirs is an occidental equivalent to the analogy in Chinese painting which compares landscape features to bone, muscle, flesh and spirit.

The portrait drawings, mostly of folk heroes, are identified with name and attributes, but their likeness in each case does not call forth resemblance. Features are delicate and restrained, gestures are hesitant, tenuous—qualities which give the portraits a fragility by contrast with the more robust landscapes.

Finally, as if the drawn image were not enough or as if the element of fantasy were apt to be too strong. the identity of each drawing is reaffirmed by the written word. The name of the place, of the country, of the continent and sometimes other information as well is inscribed along with signature and date on each drawing. Such detailed documentation, as if it had come from a traveler's journal, reaffirms the dimension of Yoakum's reality.

"O, yes, I have been there many times."

Whitney Halstead

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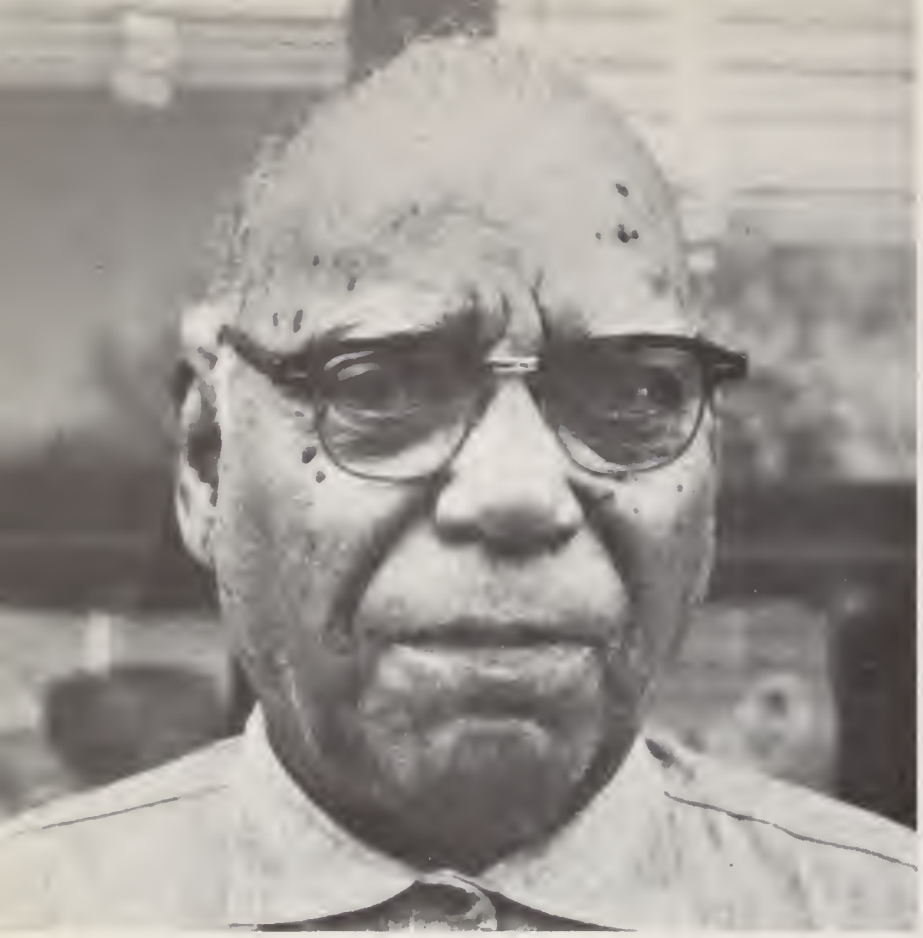

JOSEPH ELMER YOAKUM

1886 (or 1888) born. Window Rock. Navajo Reservation, Arizona

1901—Ran away from home and joined Adams Forpaugh Circus

1902—Joined the Buffalo Bill circus and later, the Sells Flota circus. Traveled to China

1903—Joined the Ringling Bros. Circus, and became personal valet to John Ringling

1908—Around the world as stowaway hobo—Europe, Russia, Jerusalem, China, Siberia, Australia and Canada

1910—Married, five children; remarried, 1929

1911—Traveled to South America, Central America, Mexico

1918—In the Army, World War I, France

1962—Motivated by a dream, he started to draw.

Joseph E. Yoakum

One Man Exhibitions

ca. 1966 First drawings exhibited at a Senior Center in Chicago, Illinois

1967 Sherbayn Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

1969 Pennsylvania State University Art Museum University Park, Pennsylvania

1970 Candy Store Gallery, Folsom, California

1971 Wabash Transit Gallery, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

1971 Rockford College, Rockford, Illinois

Group Exhibitions

1969 Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois

1972 Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

Lenders to the Exhibition:

Dennis Adrian, Chicago, Illinois
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Mr. and Mrs. Richard Fraenkel, Narragansett, Rhode Island
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Douglas Kenyon, Inc. Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
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Whitney Museum of American Art
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Telephone (212) 249-4100
Museum hours: Daily 11-6, Sunday 12-6, Tuesday 11-10

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